

U. S. CONGRESS, DISTRICT #2

Congressional District 2 rare GOP bastion in Oregon

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Congressional District 2 is a big splash of Republican red in the otherwise solid blue Democratic map of Oregon's House districts.

CD2 covers the eastern two-thirds of the state and sloshes west at its southern end to take in Klamath Falls, Medford and Grants Pass. All or part of 20 of Oregon's 36 counties are in the district, including Wasco and Hood River counties.

It's an alternative political universe to the rest of Oregon — a place where Donald Trump received 57 percent of the presidential vote in 2016 when he won 39 percent statewide. Republicans outnumber Democrats by more than 50,000 registered voters.

The math makes the Republican member of Congress virtually impossible to dislodge. Republicans have won the seat in every election since 1980, when 12-term Democratic Rep. Al Ullman narrowly lost the seat to Republican Denny Smith. Ullman's loss was seen as collateral damage from the landslide that swept Ronald Reagan to the presidency.

While long on topography, CD2 is short on population. House districts are based on population and the other four seats — all west of the Cascades — are held by Democrats. Both U.S. Senators are Democrats, too.

Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River, has represented the 2nd Congressional District for two decades, racking up large percentages of the vote every two years. In his toughest race, against Democrat Jamie McLeod-Skinner of



Cliff Bentz



Alex Spenser

Terrebonne in 2018, he won "just" 56 percent of the vote.

So it was no surprise that when Walden announced that he wouldn't seek re-election in 2020, the May 19 Republican primary attracted a bumper crop of hopefuls.

Former State Sen. Cliff Bentz of Ontario emerged from the scrum of 10 candidates on the ballot to take 31 percent of the vote. That was enough to win in a splintered field where former Rep. Knute Buehler, R-Bend, finished second with 22.1 percent.

Oregon Republican Party chair Bill Currier said that Bentz will easily win victory, especially in a year of stark contrasts between Republicans and Democrats. While that may turn out Democrats in other areas, in the 2nd District, he believes it will mean a large turnout by GOP voters.

"You can show sharp contrasts," Currier said.

Alex Spenser, a writer and campaign strategist from Klamath Falls, eked out a close victory in the Democratic primary. The Cook Political Report and other top national voting analysts rate the district as a "strong" or "safe" Republican district.

Cliff Bentz

Bentz was born in Salem and attended Regis High

School, a Catholic school in Stayton, but spent much of his childhood in Eastern Oregon. He received a bachelor of arts degree in history from what is now Eastern Oregon University in La Grande and a law degree from Lewis & Clark Law School in Portland. He's worked at the Ontario law firm of Yturri Rose since 1980 and is now a partner.

Bentz's political advancement has come twice through appointments to office.

The House district is so heavily Republican that Democrats did not field a candidate when Bentz ran in 2010 and 2012. He won 82 percent of the vote against Democrat Peter W. Hall in 2014, then had no opposition in 2016.

While in the House, Bentz played a key role in hammering out a bipartisan \$5.3 billion transportation package.

Bentz was appointed to the Senate in 2018 to replace Senate Minority Leader Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day, who resigned to take an appointment from Gov. Kate Brown to the Northwest Power and Conservation Planning Council. Bentz won 71.7 percent of the vote in the 2018 election.

Bentz joined the 2019 walk-out by Republican senators to deny a quorum for a vote on a carbon cap-and-trade bill that Democrats said they had enough votes to pass.

The COVID-19 pandemic that has killed over 215,000 Americans has been a personal experience for Bentz and his family. He spent 14 days in quarantine in September after his wife, Lindsay, tested positive for

the virus. Bentz tested negative and his wife has since recovered.

Despite the infection of his wife and President Donald Trump, Bentz does not support many mandatory measures taken by Brown to restrict the growth of the virus. He personally believes people should wear masks, but doesn't support requiring it. He believes the state's orders shuttering businesses to fight the virus, which led to over 400,000 unemployment claims from March to August, has gone too far.

Bentz supports the re-election of President Trump, but said Trump had been "awkward" in communicating his COVID-19 policy. He is critical of Brown and Portland officials for their handling of protests in Portland, but said Trump made a mistake in sending in federal forces.

Bentz said he would support a new stimulus bill that is targeted at the unemployed, "not everyone." He says he is concerned that Oregon's rent and mortgage payment moratoriums because of COVID-19 economic hardship are unfair to landlords and banks.

If Bentz is elected, the 2nd District will trade Walden — at one time a powerful House committee chairman when Republicans were the majority — for Bentz, a freshman with the party out of power.

Bentz said his recent experiences in the Legislature where Democrats have supermajorities in both the House and Senate is good preparation.

"I'm used to being in the minority," he said.

Alex Spenser

The built-in Republican advantages aren't the only challenges for Spenser, the Democratic candidate. COVID-19 has given Spenser little chance to canvas the district, while a relative trickle of money limits her ability to buy online and television ads.

Democratic Party of Oregon Chair K.C. Hanson said Spenser has a great message that just can't get out to voters in by far the largest district in Oregon.

"Alex believes that all people deserve a good education, good wages, and affordable health care," said Hanson. "That should resonate with all people in the district, not just Democrats." Spenser originally planned a behind the scenes role in the CD2 race, as campaign manager for Raz Mason of The Dalles. When Mason dropped out before the primary, Spenser jumped in. She won 32 percent of the vote, beating Central Point business consultant Nick Heuert, by 797 votes.

A native of Dallas, Texas, Spenser has an associate's degree in biology from Richland College in Dallas and studied English at Texas A&M University. She moved west, working at Lava Beds National Monument and Death Valley National Park. She's lived in Klamath Falls for 10 years. As a single mom, she homeschooled her daughter to the fifth grade.

Spenser says she wants to go to Congress to heal what she says have been four years of divisiveness under President Trump and his Republican allies in

Congress.

"We need a path to unity," Spenser said in a statement.

The coronavirus pandemic has upended the way lawmakers should approach their jobs. Spenser said lawmakers must work with each other to find solutions to a national crisis.

"The 'COVID-19 Revolution' that has been thrust upon us has left us needing leadership — leaders willing to stay in the room and do the hard work of communication," she said.

Spenser said the pandemic has shown the need for universal health care so influence or money don't decide who gets the best treatments.

"We need healthcare as a matter of good government infrastructure," she said.

Spenser has also campaigned on ensuring an equitable distribution of water rights. She supports "common sense gun responsibility" centered on safeguards for storage and transportation of firearms. She would like to see more federal help to seismically retrofit Oregon's roads and raise. She believes a high speed rail system could be a "relief valve" to growing congestion.

She holds a "virtual town hall" every Thursday at noon using the online meeting website Zoom. Anyone can join Spenser's meetings and ask questions or get more information.

Also on the ballot Nov. 3 is Libertarian Robert Werch, a registered nurse from Grants Pass.

Steven Mitchell of the Blue Mountain Eagle contributed to this report.

City of Hood River distributes CARES Act Funding

The Hood River City Council directed \$195,000 in CARES Act funding to local partners that aid social services agencies, business organizations and individuals economically impacted by COVID-19.

The city was allocated a total of \$299,633 in COVID-19 relief funds last spring. It has been used for outdoor fencing, signage, personal protective equipment, public communications, spring break lunches for area low-income families, and building remote work capabilities to keep municipal operations running in a socially distanced manner. The \$195,000 balance of that apportionment was authorized for community aid in a Resolution passed by city council in August. The balance of CARES Act funding must be used by Dec. 30.

City council deliberated and chose to target funding to specific sectors and needs, including aid to social services organizations, utility assistance for individuals, childcare assistance, emergency support to the Chamber of Commerce, and services for people experiencing homelessness, according to a press release.

"Hood River is blessed with an infrastructure of established community aid agencies that the city can tap

into to disburse these federal assistance dollars. Working in partnership with these entities was key to getting aid out as quickly and efficiently as possible," said Will Norris, assistant city manager/finance director.

The City of Hood River will allocate the \$195,000 CARES Act funds as follows:

• United Way Community Response Fund — \$70,000

The COVID-19 Community Response Fund was developed through a partnership of the Healthy Gorge Initiative and the United Way-Columbia Gorge to assist non-profit partners in supporting vulnerable individuals in the community. Grant applications and eligibility requirements are available at Healthy Gorge Initiative's website gorgeimpact.com while more information about this fund is at unitedwaycolumbiagorge.org. Applications are reviewed weekly by a United Way committee, processed by Healthy Gorge Initiative, and will continue to be awarded while funds are available.

"What's distinct about response funds received by the City of Hood River is that priority is given to organizations that serve Hood River residents with the intention of keeping important non-profits viable

during these difficult times," explained Paul Lindberg of Healthy Gorge Initiative.

The United Way Community Response Fund has been helping non-profits since spring of 2020. The City of Hood River's allocation of CARES Act dollars brings the fund total close to \$400,000.

• Homelessness Relief — \$45,000

City council dedicated funding to help people experiencing homelessness. The State's COVID-19 health and safety guidelines has made Hood River Shelter Services winter warming shelter's latest location at Riverside Church unworkable. For the past 10 years, shelter and meals have been provided from mid-November through mid-March. These funds from the City of Hood River will allow Hood River Shelter Services to provide non-congregate warming shelter services during the coming winter. For more information, contact director@hoodrivercares.org.

• Mid-Columbia Community Action Council, Individual Utility Assistance — \$40,000

For those experiencing difficulty with basic living expenses related to COVID-19, relief can be requested in the amount of \$300 per household for utilities costs

to cover electricity, natural or propane gas, water-sewer and/or internet. This program, administered by the Mid-Columbia Community Action Council (MCCAC), can be accessed by phoning 541-386-4027, ext. 310. Only residents of Hood River are eligible for city funding; however, MCCAC offers other relief funds to households outside Hood River. Those who have received prior relief from MCCAC can apply by providing information on how they've been impacted by COVID-19 with copies of recent bills. If households have not been helped by MCCAC before, additional documentation is required, including identification, a valid Social Security number and income records.

• Child Care Partners — \$25,000

The city is contracting with Child Care Partners, a local child care resource, referral and training agency. The organization will be using City CARES Act funds to provide resources and support necessary to help existing Hood River programs reopen or expand, and to recruit new child care providers and programs in the city. Child Care Partners provides COVID-19 resources and has developed FAQs, tools, and guidance for providers and families as well

as Emergency Child Care. For more information, visit cgcc.edu/childcare.

• Chamber of Commerce Support — \$10,000

A portion of the CARES Act funds will go to the Hood River County Chamber of Commerce to maintain viability and services to local businesses after experiencing severe revenue reductions attributable to COVID-19.

• City of Hood River — \$5,000

Continuing COVID-19 related costs incurred by the city. (Past expenditures have included PPE and city hall safety upgrades, and technology for employees to use while working from home.)

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